

**Interview with Wende Walsh conducted by Linda Byrne
For the Providence District History Project
Providence Perspective**

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Linda: Interview with Today is April 10, 2008 I am Linda Byrne and I am sitting here at Oakton High School in the providence District with Wende Newton Walsh, and how are you?

Wende: I am fine and actually I owe the spelling of that name to Oakton High School. My real name is Wendelin which has a lin on the end of it but when I came here in 1967 that is as much as the computer could print out, some Newton Wende and I liked the spelling that way so I spelled it that way ever since.

Linda: Tell me about yourself, where you were born, about your early life and how you grew up.

Wende: Well I grew up as a Navy military brat. My father was in the Navy and at that point Navy Intelligence was assigned to the Pentagon, State side one tour and then overseas another tour. I was born at Bethesda at the Naval Hospital, so I am from here but I am not. After I was born here we went to Japan for two years when I was a wee little one then back to State side and lived in Coronado, no lived here I am getting confused. Then we lived in Cuba for two years, then Coronado, CA for two years then Taiwan for two years. So that was the military roaming. Then finely back here and I went to Sidney Lanier, Bob Russell was the Principal at Lanier and then when I student taught at Robinson he was the Principal at Robinson. Then I actually taught at Robinson one year.

Linda: When would that have been?

Wende: Five years into teaching would have been in 1980 and he was my principal then as well. After that he left Robinson and became the Superintendent of City Schools, Fairfax City Schools. I recall taking in my Chattahoochee my Lanier Yearbook and showing him and he didn't change

much how he looked over the years. Then I went to the old Fairfax High School now Paul VI.

Linda: What year did you graduate from Paul VI? It is Paul VI but was Fairfax Public High School.

Wende: It is Paul VI now, which I only went for two years because Oakton opened, and they had meetings the way they do now but not as many maybe only had one or two and basically in those days they would listen to what to had to say and my mother kept saying that she has been going to all these different schools and for once in her life and we want her to go to a school consecutively, we are not moving.

My father actually extended his tour so I cold finish out my high school here but the county said no, unless you had a parent who worked for the county or school system you were going to go to the new school. So I came here for the last two years and that was 67' and 68'. It was the first year the building opened and half us came from the old Fairfax, which was Fairfax City School and the other half came from Madison, which was a Vienna town school.

So basically we came from schools that really had community and spirit where the whole city, town or community was behind the high school, much like the olden days much like the 40's and 50's as opposed to Northern Virginia the Region.

So it was hard, as kids of course we had a marvelous time getting to know each other but this was it, we had no choice we were going to be here. So, we got to do the first of everything. Every club and everything we did was a first. A couple of years later reflecting back it dawned on me the real down side of that was there were no senior boys when we were juniors so that cut your dating field in half so that is what I would tell the kids whenever they would complain that there were more girls than boys in their class. Just think of having half of your dating pool cut off because there were no seniors. But as juniors we were top dog and as seniors so maybe it went to our heads as a class a little bit.

It also meant we were the guinea pigs for everything, certain things like Bob Hicks was on the committee for the gala.

Linda: Bob Hicks went on to be the County Supervisor.

Wende: He helped out a lot with the gala and I was really impressed with him, but he was three years behind me so when I was a senior he was a freshman and he was with the first class that went all four years. So we all have our memories from the firsts at that time and the building did not have lockers yet.

If you remember from those days, I don't know what era you are but in the 50's on TV they all always use to carry their books like this and I don't think you see kids do that now because they have a backpack but they also had a strap that went around the books. But when you have a locker you are only taking one or two books for your next class and a notebook. But, when you don't have a locker you are taking six books so everyone instead of having a backpack were carrying this whole pile of books if you wanted to have your books for class, so that was a disadvantage. The cafeteria wasn't finished; the kitchen wasn't so we had to brown bag it for a number of years.

Linda: Who was the first Principal?

Wende: T. Page Johnson who lives out in Winchester he is extremely intelligent and besides being the first Principal here, he left here but he was my Principal when I came back to teach and from here he went over to the school offices and at one point he was the Assistant Superintendent. He set up this school, he is a lawyer so that everything just ran like clockwork, everything was legal everything was correct and procedures there weren't grey areas, they were black and white so you knew how things were. It was very comfortable not to go into the, oh but because then you get into the Solomon thing of trying to make a kind of decision and favoritism. He set up the school very well and I actually took a law course with him one week end just a one credit course and he really knows his stuff. He most recently printed a book, scholarly I haven't seen it but I understand from those that have it has a lot of footnotes on Custer. I think he taught Spanish and

something else before becoming a Principal so this is just that same research that you do in law he is now doing in retirement with a scholarly tone.

Linda: So you graduated from Oakton High School and went on to college where?

Wende: I started at Radford for two years and my husband to be was up here at George Mason College and I got tired of that commute up and down Rt. 81. So Radford was an all girl's school it had been a normal school and was still the college so I transferred back home and lived with a friends family.

My parents had retired to Rockport, Maine as soon as I graduated from high school and then I went to Mason my last two years. It was George Mason College when I was a junior but when I was a senior it became a University. I was in the first class of George Mason University as well. It was a small College/University nothing like it is today. So it has been fun to watch George Mason grow as well. I am not sure what they are doing at the edge of the campus but it is always changing. I had cheerleaders here several times and they often did summer camp over there so I got to be on campus and see the changes. I took Clinical Faculty with them so I got to experience the changes as a student as well because I did extended studies and graduate courses for a long time.

Linda: So you graduated from George Mason majoring in?

Wende: Spanish in 73' and I wasn't quite ready to teach. I student taught at Robinson and I thought I am just not old enough and responsible enough to have to do that so I substituted for two years mainly at TJ and here at Oakton.

The front office secretary called and said we need a Spanish teacher part time for the fall and I was living down at Fairfax Circle Villa Apartments, the other end of Blake Lane and I thought that I could walk if I had to. So I started here then and the first year I was RIFT Reduction In Force and that

was in the late 70's where we had a lot of budget problems and it was double digit inflation so one of the things that they would do in that spring budget process is lay off a lot of teachers as they do now, as a part of the public it sounds to me like usually if we put out strings and say we were going to cut elementary strings that gets some parental concern up about the budget because it is hard to get people interested. In those days they would just lay off teachers so I was laid off and ended up at Hayfield which socio economically at that point,

Linda: Is Hayfield an Elementary?

Wende: No, Hayfield secondary there at Telegraph Road and it was so very different from Oakton High School. Eventually my husband's niece and nephew went there so I taught there for a year part time as well, then came back to Oakton.

Linda: How did you make the adjustment in teaching to the different types of students?

Wende: Well I was amazed, because it comes from the parents, it is not the school it is all Fairfax County School System and we have the same philosophy from one school to another. I was doing the same thing I had done the first year of my teaching and it was my second year, and it was not working. I went home and thought what am I going to do and what I started doing was retesting because when I gave a quiz, so few passed it. The problem was it didn't bother the students and there was no concern coming from home about these grades either. So, I had a lot of C's, D's and F's and not much in the B and A range and I was use to Oakton with strong parental involvement and community A's, B's, C's and a few D's and F's. So, I started retesting so if you needed you could come in for extra help and let's go over this again and take the quiz again and we will just erase that first grade. It brought enough of those students up so that I did not feel like a failure and they were meeting with success.

Well when I came back to Oakton I figured if it worked for them, in terms of the theory that if you didn't do well you just needed more time and I have

to teach on a set schedule, I'll keep on retesting. So, I retested the whole rest of my entire career. This was a lot more work, grading, re-grading, re-entering but I always thought that I brought kids along who would not have made it otherwise and in some cases they said this to me later as they matured it did teach me to just keep trying. If I didn't learn Spanish 15 years later am I not doing anything with it, but it taught that me whatever the subject is, I can learn but it just might be on a different time schedule than somebody else. It is one thing to hear that from some people but when you really live it then it is a big AHA!! for life.

Linda: Interesting. Is that something that maybe the county may have incorporated later?

Wende: I have heard of schools, and I won't mention names, where it has been the Principal's philosophy and it was mandated. If it is mandated to a teacher and is has not done from here you are going to follow the letter of the law but you are not really going to encourage those students. You are doing it because you have to, you don't want to and they will sense that. The most important thing for students for me was that no matter what, they thought it was fair. Fair goes a long way.

I was RIFT every year and I got so tired of it. You could get unemployment and go out and look for limited jobs. You could go to Arlington put in an application and have an interview or Loudon but there just weren't any jobs and I was kind of to the point where I thought that maybe I would leave teaching. It is ridiculous when you go from April when you got your RIFT notice until August. The worst was my last RIFT here from Oakton I taught full time for three years and I was RIFT and I also was the 17th Spanish teacher they RIFT, the very last one. When they recalled that fall is when I ended up in Robinson in a 3/4 position which meant I taught four classes instead of five which is a 2/3 position it was a 1/3 cut in pay which hurt. I was the last one they recalled so it was 10 o'clock at night with school starting the next day and I hadn't heard anything. I knew one of the other teachers on the list and she heard something so I was really in a panic until 10 o'clock at night I got a call, which said you are going to go to Robinson in the morning. So, I was relieved but when you don't know for that many

months in a year whether you are going to be able to pay the rent in the fall or mortgage it is hard. But, that was my last RIFT.

My husband was U.S. Park Service and he wanted to go to all these wonderful places even up to Boston and live there, but I could not give up my seniority with Fairfax County, so we lived apart for two years because I was not about to give up my seniority. I had been RIFT so many times I figured they would start all over again but truly they stopped doing it. They RIFT part time teachers now I think that is it.

Linda: Did your husband come back here with the Park Service?

Wende: He did. He passed three years ago, and when he passed he had just retired. He was the Chief Park Ranger at the White House. He had been at Arlington House, where he dressed in period costume.

Linda: What years was he at Arlington House?

Wende: I can't remember this, I can do mine but not his.

Linda: The reason I asked is because my husband was in the Park Service also. He retired and he managed the George Washington Parkway (GW) in the 80's and Arlington House was of course part of the GW Parkway and so I am sure he would have met your husband.

Wende: He would have to have met him because my husband's first job was with the Bi-Centennial Commission under John Warner and so he was actually a Tech he was with the Interior, then he was with the Washington Monument, at the Ellipse, the Tidal Basin and from there he went to the Arlington House. Phil Walsh, you have to ask your husband.

Linda: Yes I have to ask my husband. That is a small world and family the Park Service. But, back to you so, you lived apart for two years and then he came back here.

Wende: He went to the White House.

Linda: I bet he had some interesting stories to tell.

Wende: Well he had the most miserable handwriting and they use to have entertainment for those who were sitting in the bleachers and stands waiting to go into the White House and part of his job was to arrange for some of that entertainment. They had many nationally known bands that did it for free, like Alabama and some of these groups. He would contact them and sometimes they would just contact him. I now the choir and I think the band from Oakton had gone down because they had to have entertainment all day long. Well there was a new Secretary of the Interior Baldrich I believe it was who didn't like the noise because the Interior Building was right there so he said no amps. Well a lot of those big bands are not going to play without amplification so that was pretty much the end of the program. It wasn't popular with my husband.

The nice part of our careers was that he had off Sunday's and Mondays and since I had the weekends off we each got a day off throughout the years on our own and then one together. I always thought that was the best way to have a weekend vacation throughout the years.

Linda: I noticed that you are in the local newspaper here, Oakton celebrates its 40th Gala open house Wende Walsh and Oakton High School's first graduating class a picture of you with the class of 69' and after college you returned to teach here and retired from the school system having taught here until the end of your career. Is that right?

Wende: Yes, 31 years. The last year I had stepped down, my husband passed and being Department Chair is a lot more difficult than it sounds but I was the Foreign Language Department Chair for the last years so that is interesting because it is a little bit different. Teaching a class of 30 students is one thing but being in charge of 20 teachers is something else.

Linda: Did they have 20 language teachers?

Wende: It varies. A lot of time we have part time teachers and six languages.

Linda: Which languages do you teach here?

Wende: Japanese, ASL (American Sign Language), Latin, French, Spanish and German. Over the years we added. We had Russian and usually either the Russian or Japanese the numbers would get very low and we had to look and maybe drop a language. So we did drop the Russian but the Japanese has sustained it. We dropped the Russian because we knew they were putting in the Japanese immersion and the kids would be coming here so we had to have the program set up for them to come anyway. We tend to have a lot of part time teachers so it might be 15 or 14 full time teachers and five or six part time. So it can run 19 or 20.

Linda: How many students would be taking language?

Wende: I am thinking back because it has been a few years since I looked at the numbers, roughly if the school enrollment is around 24 around 1800 or 1900 so most of the students are taking a foreign language. In Spanish for example we have the 4th year which is not required, even three years is not required but that gives the Governor's seal on your diploma. But we have one teacher and that is all she teaches five classes of level four. Plus besides that we have two Advance Placement (AP) classes which means seven sections or close to 300 students who are at that next year. So that is a lot of students who go one year more than they have to. But then we have beyond that; we have three classes of 5th year so the students really do pursue the language beyond the requirements so it has been a large program. And, I am tickled because my last class of 3rd year students from three years ago, I had just retired and I just taught five sections of 3rd year, well last year they were at AP and they had a 96 percent pass rate. So a lot of schools they go three then four then the AP but at Oakton if they are ready we advance them right into AP and most of the students are from 3rd and straight into AP's so they have one less year than many other high schools and yet they still had a 96 percent pass rate. It was a brand new exam so the teacher didn't even know what the exam exactly was it going to be like so it is hard to even prep them for the exact types of questions they would be doing.

Linda: Tell me about how that helps with college and their requirement on the college level for language?

Wende: Spanish particularly because that is what I taught, and that is where my heart is. Often times they will get to college where the professor really might be a native speaker so they don't really know about learning a language because they already speak it or maybe they learned English but they don't really don't understand the English student trying to learn Spanish and how things have to be explained so they can learn. Also colleges go too quickly so I have had so many students come back over the years and tell me they have a study group where they have become their own little teacher and they teach my methods, the anagrams and all the things that I made up to get them through the language so they could understand until they could speak and then let go. So they go off to UVA and they share this and their study groups are very happy with learning it my way so it is the language but a lot of them have majored/minored in Spanish as a tool such as computers was a tool. They may have majored in it or minored in something else but they come back and say I am using this so many different ways which 20 years ago you could not have predicted.

Linda: There is something in the county where you can meet your college requirement in four languages.

Wende: By tests?

Linda: I don't know if it is by tests or by taking an advance course, but there are students who have taken my son being one, who is 23 now, at Madison and he fulfilled his requirement at George Mason for two years of French because he had taken and I am not sure –

Wende: Oh! He had probably taken the AP exam and received a certain amount of credits. You said George Mason?

Linda: Yes he went to George Mason from George Madison High.

Wende: George Mason, the last I knew for Spanish if you got, like I had said the kids received 96 percent had passed and meant they had gotten

three. George Mason gives 12 credits towards the credits for graduation. Some schools say you don't have to take those 12 credits you can take them in something else. But, just a few years ago George Mason was actually giving those credits towards the 120 for graduation, with a four on the AP language and if you got a four on the AP Literature the 5th year you got 15 credits.

Linda: So that is really a credit to what you all are doing here in the county, isn't it?

Wende: Because if you love language but that is not what you want to major in that gives you credit towards your graduation, which is money in your pocket. At that point the county was paying for the AP test, so just take the test and you are getting thousands of dollars of college credits for what you learned in high school.

Linda: I do remember that because there was at one point a controversy whether families would have to pay for that test or if the county was going to pay for it.

Wende: I guess that controversy is rearing its ugly head again, with the budget. That is 1 ½ hour class that I would usually get this time of year for next year in terms of scheduling. If you met your three years you could stop but if you take AP's opposed to four then depending on which college you go to, they may say we will exempt you from the foreign language credit or like George Mason credits towards your 120. Well that is money in the bank and that is a lot in this day and age.

Linda: It is, it is. Tell me something about your personal life.

Wende: Well, I have no children and I actually met my husband when I was living in Fairfax Villa, which the two years that I went here the Fairfax Villa out by Camp Washington came to Oakton. As soon as they opened Robinson they switched them to Robinson, but that is where I met my husband, at the teen table at the pool. So I had known him from about the time I was 11 or 12 and we were just friends. I went off to Radford and he had gone off to the University of Texas the year before in El Paso and I

realized I missed him so we started dating a little bit as opposed to just being friends. When I was at Mason those last two years we really started dating and we were engaged for exactly one year. I graduated from George Mason on May 25, 1973 and got married the next day. So I would have had, had he lived, we would have been having our 35th wedding anniversary. So we were married for 32 years but no kids.

Linda: Actually you had lots of kids.

Wende: Exactly. On Mothers Day I use to think I have no children but then I would say, no I had a lot of children. I had a group of friends and I don't know if this is the paper that has Phil Bigler on it or not. Phil Bigler was a year behind me at Oakton, he was class of 70' and started his teaching career the same year I did here at Oakton and he was the 1998 National Teacher of the Year. McClain put him up and he was Fairfax County's Teacher of the Year and then the Regional – they have eight regions and he made it to the Regional's here in Virginia where he was named Virginia Teacher of the Year. Then the 50 teachers throughout the country, it is more than 50 because it has maybe Guam and some other places and he was named National Teacher of the Year. So he taught for a few more years in Fairfax County but now he is down at the Madison Center he is a Historian and he is in charge of the Madison Center for the studies of James Madison.

Linda: What did he teach?

Wende: History. He was into games and made up games but they were educational games, no playing around. Bill is a no nonsense teacher, he would have my Phil arrange a Gettysburg tour or wherever they were going so that when they got there and they got their tour and they got the best tour because was he was giving really giving it from the heart. Phil believes in academic rigor was an academic and he would take the kids on a Saturday and not on a school day where they would miss their classes and that way you would get the kids who were really interested in the educational experience and not just get out all of their classes. He finished his Fairfax County Career out of Thomas Jefferson the school for the gifted. Well he got a lot of parent complaints because he would put the sign up on

his door at 6am and it was first come, first served. It was for a Saturday and he was only taking 60 or 80 students whatever it was and when he got to that he closed it out. Well parent complaints, parent complaints it is not fair my daughter can't get there until 6:30 or 7:30. And that is how good a teacher he is the kids are upset because they can't go on a field trip on a Saturday with him anymore. He is at James Madison University and is still doing those field trips on Saturdays with his graduate students. They have been best buds and that is why I mention him so much, they were our family here and we would get together every single Saturday night, they also had no children, so that would be my personal life, the four of us getting together watching a movie.

Linda: Tell me about the years you have lived in the county how things have changed as far as shopping, movies, entertainment, and traffic?

Wende: It is to the point here where Chris Bradshaw is the [unintelligible] here and her son would make fun of people who go I can remember when this was, he is a School Base Technology Specialist, he makes us sound like an old biddy and I can hear myself because that is exactly what I do. I don't know if you have ever seen The Local Color, Jackie Colley who does these prints of all of these places in Northern Virginia, how they use to be. There are two different one she has at Oakton High School where it is an etching and they are colored; she has a shop in Occoquan now. I just went out to her shop in Occoquan and she had a little sale table so I went through there and there was a George Walker hardware, that is what Kamp Washington was there is nothing at Kamp Washington that is what it was and there is nothing in University Shopping Center. Everything is so changed; there are no Drug Fairs.

Linda: Kamp Washington is where?

Wende: Where Rt. 29 and Rt. 50 cross. That actual junction I think is the Exxon gas station, so many of the gas stations are disappearing the last year or two, there also was a Drug Fair and a Giant Food, a 5 and dime cent store but it doesn't make any difference where it was because everything has changed. Kinney Shoes is now Blinds to Go, over here the Safeway is now a rug place, the ABC Store is something else. I look at all these places

and then I say what happened to the Grand Union everything is different but I can still see it as it was in the 60's. But it does sound like an old biddy going I can remember when it was so different, and it is remarkably different but it is so funny because my parents came here and lived down at the Colmar Apartments in the late 40's and she would say the same thing because this was truly the boonies. But where they lived in Falls Church then was really considered the boonies. So as the line has moved out and now the younger folks are going out to Loudon or even farther out just because everything is already developed. So very changed, the corner of Rt. 29 and Blake Lane was actually dirt, the road was cut in where dirt had been so it wasn't at ground level as it is now. It was kind of up high and narrow and Pickett Road use to be the same way and if it was foggy like it was this morning and you were going down Pickett you would have pretty much hit the sides to get down the road. Well the entrance into Blake Lane was constantly being missed so people who were trying to get to Oakton High School who hadn't been here would say I didn't see it, because you had to see that little sign that said Blake Lane that no one ever heard of in order to catch the road to get to Oakton.

The cows and that is the one I beat myself up on. It was natural that there would be cows that close to school where Nutley and Courthouse intersect and no there was no Metro. I was on Federal Jury duty over in Alexandria and they were planning, I don't know what the suit was but I guess they settled it out of court but none of those townhouses were there and Metro wasn't there so I guess they knew what it was going to be because that is what the suit was about. No, that was just field, so different so different.

Linda: What would you like the people in the future to know about Fairfax County?

Wende: That it is always changing and change is part of life and you look and say I forgot all about that hardware store, or I forgot about this but what comes along could be better. You just have to give it a chance and take each day as it comes.

Linda: Do you have a particular fond memory of a student or a teaching story?

Wende: This is one of the questions they had for, I guess it is a Blog and I answered that with I have too many to single one out. I went to a Racket Ball Club yesterday to try it out and the other teacher I went with said, oh this is a student from Oakton and I said yes and one of my cheerleaders from 92'. Just too many, I think more it is the kids that aren't here. The kids from my class - one had a motorcycle accident going around what use to be a bad corner on Blake Lane and they turned it into Germantown Road and another killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. He was coming back from Ocean City; we were still in college then. Both of these were just after high school. So from my own class, some in Viet Nam and different students here their lives were cut short. Those are my bittersweet memories. I figured they had to be great kids that God was ready to take them up now. They were all great kids and out by the flagpole is Monica Malhalmotra??? She passed n 91' I think it was. She had a lump on her arm and it was carcinoma. So it is when you see these lives cut short those are the kids who really are forever young. They are frozen in time and it is the kids that aren't with us today but still so fondly remembered.

Linda: You talked about your cheerleaders, was that an extra curricular activity that you were involved in?

Wende: I sponsored cheerleaders and Drill Team, at one point cheerleaders and Drill Team. It gave me something to do and keep me off the streets, but truly I have trouble going to games now because I overdosed on them. It was fun because you really got to spend time with them and I was never a cheerleader so the fact that I am teaching them how is just a matter of being patient enough to say no not that. I lived with a friend's family when I went to George Mason since my family had moved and her daughter wanted to be a cheerleader and she said could you come and help her out? So I did and she made cheerleading and to this day she thanks Aunt Wendy because she knows that she would not have been a cheerleader if I hadn't helped her. For someone who can't do anything myself I said yes. That was fun.

Linda: Well this has been a really interesting interview please tell me what you are looking forward doing in retirement.

Wende: Well, my husband was an extreme collector, extreme, extreme so right now I am getting rid of his collections and I have traveled all I want to except for maybe to Ireland so it is just kind of like being in college and you haven't decided what your major is or being in high school and not deciding what college you are going to. I don't know where retirement is going to take me yet.

Linda: The world is your oyster. Wonderful, thank you so much for this interview.

Wende: Thank you, it was fun.